

Nonverbal Communication

It is not only what you say in the classroom that is important, but it's how you say it that can make the difference to students. Nonverbal messages are an essential component of communication in the teaching process.

Teachers should be aware of nonverbal behavior in the classroom for three major reasons:

- An awareness of nonverbal behavior will allow you to become better receivers of students' messages.
- You will become a better sender of signals that reinforce learning.
- This mode of communication increases the degree of the perceived psychological closeness between teacher and student.

Some major areas of nonverbal behaviors to explore are:

- Eye contact
- Facial expressions
- Gestures
- Posture and body orientation
- Proximity
- Paralinguistics
- Humor

Eye contact:

Eye contact, an important channel of interpersonal communication, helps regulate the flow of communication. And it signals interest in others. Furthermore, eye contact with audiences increases the speaker's credibility. Teachers who make eye contact open the flow of communication and convey interest, concern, warmth and credibility.

Facial expressions:

Smiling is a powerful cue that transmits:

- Happiness
- Friendliness
- Warmth
- Liking
- Affiliation

Thus, if you smile frequently you will be perceived as more likable, friendly, warm and approachable. Smiling is often contagious and students will react favorably and learn more.

Gestures:

If you fail to gesture while speaking, you may be perceived as boring, stiff and unanimated. A lively and animated teaching style captures students' attention, makes the material more interesting, facilitates learning and provides a bit of entertainment. Head nods, a form of gestures, communicate positive reinforcement to students and indicate that you are listening.

Posture and body orientation:

You communicate numerous messages by the way you walk, talk, stand and sit. Standing erect, but not rigid, and leaning slightly forward communicates to students that you are approachable, receptive and friendly. Furthermore, interpersonal closeness results when you and your students face each other. Speaking with your back turned or looking at the floor or ceiling should be avoided; it communicates disinterest to your class.

Proximity:

Cultural norms dictate a comfortable distance for interaction with students. You should look for signals of discomfort caused by invading students' space. Some of these are:

- Rocking
- Leg swinging
- Tapping
- Gaze aversion

Typically, in large college classes space invasion is not a problem. In fact, there is usually too much distance. To counteract this, move around the classroom to increase interaction with your students. Increasing proximity enables you to make better eye contact and increases the opportunities for students to speak.

Paralinguistics:

This facet of nonverbal communication includes such vocal elements as:

- Tone
- Pitch
- Rhythm
- Timbre
- Loudness
- Inflection

For maximum teaching effectiveness, learn to vary these six elements of your voice. One of the major criticisms is of instructors who speak in a monotone. Listeners perceive these instructors as boring and dull. Students report that they learn less and lose interest more quickly when listening to teachers who have not learned to modulate their voices.

Humor:

Humor is often overlooked as a teaching tool, and it is too often not encouraged in college classrooms. Laughter releases stress and tension for both instructor and student. You should develop the ability to laugh at yourself and encourage students to do the same. It fosters a friendly classroom environment that facilitates learning. (Lou Holtz wrote that when his players felt successful he always observed the presence of good humor in the locker room.)